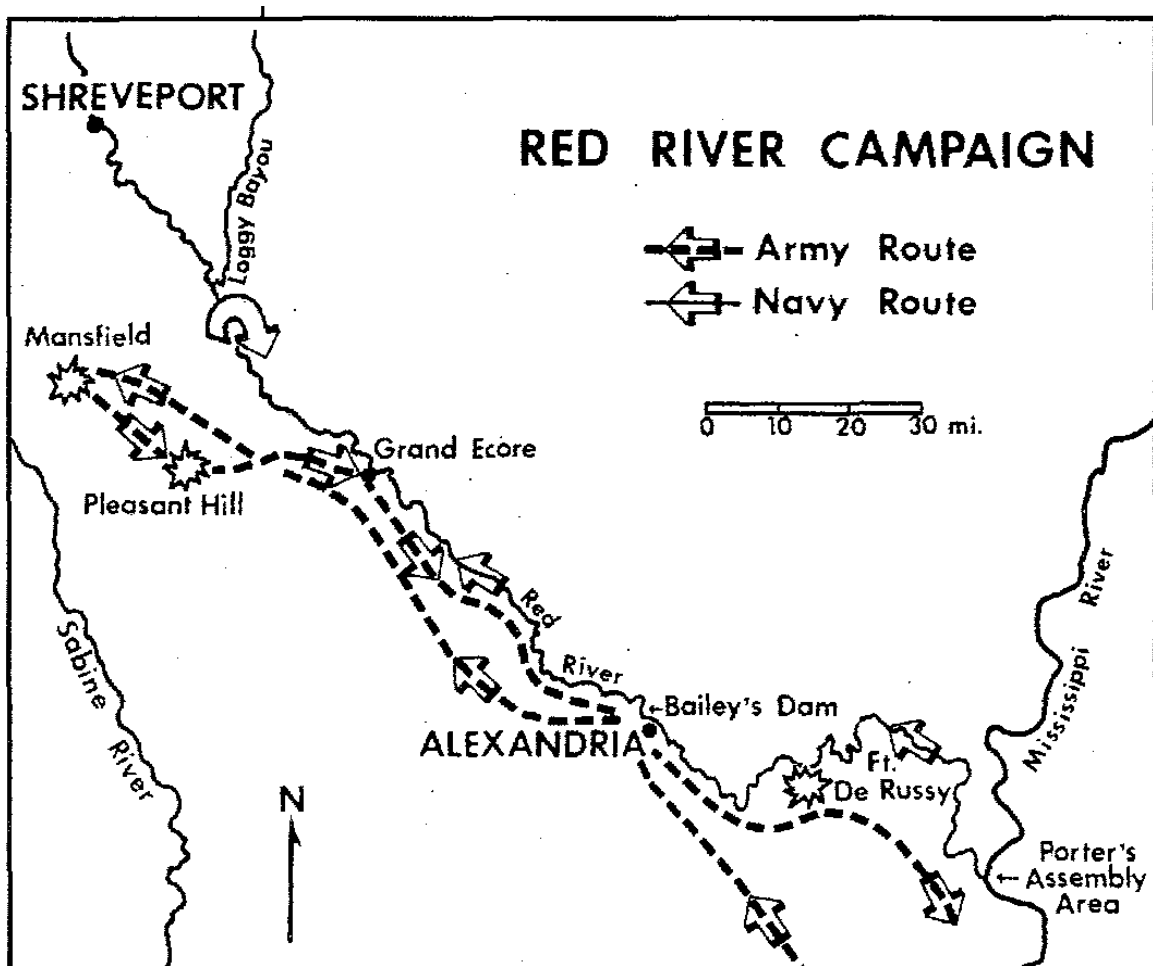


The Red River Campaign

The last major campaign involving the *Eastport*, and the Mississippi Squadron as a whole, was the Red River Campaign in the spring of 1864. This campaign was a combined army-navy venture involving a move up the Red River to gain control of western Louisiana and Arkansas and cut off Confederate supplies flowing from Texas.



The overall commander of the campaign was General Nathaniel P. Banks, while Rear Admiral David Porter commanded the naval forces. The plan was for General Banks to march 22,000 men overland from New Orleans to the lower Red River where they would meet Porter's naval forces. Aboard transports with Porter's fleet were 11,000 men detached from Sherman's army at Vicksburg under the command of General A.J. "Whiskey" Smith. General Smith's troops were to join Banks's army as it marched up the south side of the Red River to Alexandria and eventually to Shreveport, while Porter's ships moved up the river in support. A third force, under General Frederick Steele, was to march from Little Rock, Arkansas, and join Banks when he reached the upper Red River. Ultimately, General Steele remained in Arkansas and never became involved in the campaign. Opposing the Union forces were Confederate troops under the command of General Richard Taylor, son of President Zachary Taylor. Taylor is reported to have had only about 6,000 men at his command when the campaign started.

The fleet that Admiral Porter began to assemble at the mouth of the Red River in the second week of March 1864 represented the most powerful gathering of river gunboats since the campaign against Vicksburg. There were over 20 ironclad gunboats, heavily armored monitors and lightly armored steamboats known as "tinclads," in addition to troop transports and support vessels such as tugs and pump boats. At 10 a.m. on March 12 Porter's fleet got underway and moved up Red River. That afternoon, General Smith's men were disembarked at Simmesport on the Atchafalaya River. The flotilla then proceeded up the Red, with the *Eastport* taking the lead. On the evening of March 14, Fort De Russy,

the only Confederate fortification on the lower Red, quickly surrendered after being attacked by the *Eastport*, the other lead gunboats, and by Banks's land troops. By March 16 most of the Union fleet had reached Alexandria and army forces were beginning to arrive. At Alexandria, the Red River was so low that the boats had a difficult time getting over the rapids that stretched across the river just above the town. The *Eastport*, the largest ship in the fleet, ran aground and two days were spent pulling it into deeper water above the rapids. Eventually, on March 29, Porter proceeding upriver with 12 gunboats and 30 transports and supply vessels, leaving the remainder of his fleet behind at Alexandria.

By April 2, Admiral Porter's fleet began to arrive at Grand Ecore, the river landing near Natchitoches. Because of the continually falling river, Porter decided to leave his larger gunboats, including the *Eastport*, at Grand Ecore and continued upriver with only six light-draft gunboats and several support steamers. This small fleet ascended the Red River to a point about 30 miles below Shreveport where the Confederates had sunk the steamboat *New Falls City*, completely blocking the channel. At the same time, the army under General Banks was attacked by Taylor's troops near Mansfield and again at Pleasant Hill on April 8 and 9 and was forced to retreat south toward Alexandria. Hearing this, on April 13 Admiral Porter turned his gunboats around and headed down river. By now, in addition to low water and "torpedoes," or mines, planted in the river by the Confederates, the boats had to contend with sniper fire from the riverbanks. On April 15, as the fleet moved down the Red, the *Eastport* struck a Confederate mine and sank in shallow water. Through tremendous effort the gunboat was

pumped out and lightened of much of its heavy gear and the crew began to float their vessel down river. Over the next several days the ironclad continued to run aground and eventually all of the guns were taken off, as well as the ordnance. Several boats had to aid the *Eastport* and this began to endanger the entire fleet because of the continually dropping river as well as harassment from Confederate snipers and cannon batteries on shore. Finally, on April 26, just below the town of Montgomery, the *Eastport* ran aground in shallow water and no amount of effort could free it. Realizing that his ship was doomed, Captain Phelps removed everything of value, placed 8 barrels of gunpowder aboard the *Eastport* and blew them up, reportedly "utterly destroying" the gunboat. Phelps and his crew then proceeded down river on other vessels.

At Alexandria, the rest of Admiral Porter's retreating fleet was trapped above the rapids by the low water and was in danger of being attacked by General Taylor's forces. However, an ingenious dam designed by Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Bailey was quickly built that raised the river enough to get all of the fleet safely across the rapids. Without "Baileys Dam" most of the United States gunboat fleet might have been destroyed or captured, an event that would have been one of the greatest losses in American naval history. It is no wonder that Admiral Porter claimed that the dam was "the greatest engineering feat ever performed."

Most would agree that the Red River Campaign was a failure; it did not succeed in its military objectives and much of the Mississippi Squadron came close to being trapped and captured by the Confederates. The expedition had cost the Union army over five thousand casualties and

many pieces of artillery. The Navy lost over 300 men, two pump boats, four transport steamers and two lightly armed "tinclads." In addition, they had been forced to destroy the largest gunboat in the entire fleet, the ironclad Eastport.¹

1. The Rivers and Harbor Act of 1968 constructed a series of locks and dams on the red river. On April 19, 2000, the waterway was renamed the J. Bennett Johnston Waterway. A series of studies to assess the impact of the J Bennett Johnston Waterway on the cultural resources of the area. This booklet² presents the results of one of those studies.

2. Charles E. Pearson and Thomas C. C. Birchett, Two Civil War Steamboat Wrecks on Red River: The History and Archaeology of the Ironclad USS Eastport and the Steamer Ed. F. Dix. pp.10-13.